

Linguistic Typology and Cross-Linguistic Psycholinguistics

Workshop convenors:

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Workshop length:

One day, with eight main talks, plus an introduction by the workshop convenors and a final discussion.

Workshop description

Grammarians and psycholinguists are both very interested in cross-linguistic differences and universals, but they go about their data collection and theorizing in quite different ways. Typological research on grammar traditionally builds on pre-existing grammatical descriptions, reanalyzed by typologists who may not be able to speak most of the languages they include in their survey, supplemented by corpora of natural language production or informal native-speaker judgments, with data sampled from a large and typologically varied set of languages, many with relatively few speakers or signers, chosen to maximize representativeness, in order to generalize across all possible human languages, not merely across attested human languages (see, e.g., Song, 2010).

By contrast, cross-linguistic psycholinguistics traditionally involves experiments run by large research teams consisting of native speakers of all of the languages being tested, who use artfully selected test materials and controlled procedures to compare, due to practical limitations, only two or three languages at a time, which are generally major world languages, chosen either for accessibility to the research team or for testing specific cross-language variables (see, e.g., Bates et al., 2001).

This workshop aims to bring these two worlds closer together. For typologists, cross-linguistic variation in language processing and the relative processing difficulty of different linguistic features are theoretically important but difficult to study without adopting psycholinguistic methods like controlled experiments. For psycholinguists, there are serious practical challenges to collecting sufficiently large and varied cross-linguistic samples while maintaining the methodological consistency needed for typological analysis, especially when studying populations without formal test-taking traditions.

There seems to be increasing awareness in the international linguistics community of the need for typologists and psycholinguists to work together, with the increasing use of experimentation by typological grammarians (e.g., Bickel et al., 2015), the increasing variety of languages studied by psycholinguists (e.g., Norcliffe et al., 2015), and the increasing number of workshops devoted to the topic, including the independently organized, but more narrowly focused, workshop on Morphological Typology and Linguistic Cognition, to be held during the LSA's 2017 Linguistic Summer Institute.

A variety of cross-linguistic psycholinguistic data sources can be used to address typological questions, not just traditional laboratory experiments but also processing-oriented fieldwork (e.g., Whalen & McDonough, 2015) and processing-oriented corpora, including collections of speech errors (Schütze & Ferreira, 2007) and databases of previously collected experimental results (e.g., Keuleers & Balota, 2015). While typological grammarians have become increasingly interested in artificial grammar learning experiments, in which participants are taught patterns that obey or violate hypothesized typological universals (e.g., Culbertson, 2012), such studies best fit our workshop if they are run across speakers/signers

of different languages to see if the hypothetically favored grammar type is learned more easily regardless of first language experience.

Thus we are particularly looking for presentations that address questions like the following:

1. **How does cross-linguistic variation affect language processing, as revealed in experiments or psycholinguistic corpora?** For example, how do speakers/signers of languages that differ in morphology (e.g., rich vs. impoverished inflectional systems), phonology (e.g., complex vs. simple syllables), or orthography (e.g., alphabetic vs. non-alphabetic) differ in their real-time access of words in the mental lexicon? Are there are fundamental similarities in the syntactic parsing strategies in speakers/signers of languages of different syntactic types (e.g., left/right-headed, with/without null pronouns), or does every language require its own distinct set of parsing strategies?
2. **How can cross-linguistic experiments and psycholinguistic corpora help explain cross-linguistic variation and universals?** Are typologically more common grammatical features easier for adults to process, even after taking into account experience with their own first language (L1)? Are certain L1 features easier to learn than others, regardless of the L1? Is this also true for second language (L2) acquisition, or in artificial grammar learning experiments, even when the influence of the L1 is taken into account? Do certain L1 properties tend to be transferred to the L2 or artificial language, regardless of the L1 or L2?
3. **How can the size and scope of cross-linguistic psycholinguistic samples be increased while maintaining methodological consistency and rigor?** Are there experimental methods that are equally natural in all cultures, and if not, how could methodological variation be taken into account when studying linguistic variation? Should cross-linguistic psycholinguistics move away from the traditional single-team approach to a more decentralized Web-coordinated approach, represented by projects like the Endangered Languages Archive (Nathan, 2013), where independent researchers collect data for their own purposes, but also share some for the benefit of typological analysis (Myers, 2016)? If a speech/sign community cannot enforce covert processing standards (e.g., arbitrarily requiring members to process different structures at different speeds), do genetic relatedness and geographic proximity remain a concern when psycholinguists sample languages for testing universal claims, or need they only be concerned with sampling a sufficient variety of language types?

References

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